

Queerly Categorized: LGBTQ+ Subjects and Language in the Catalog

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Many of us have had the experience of finding The One, that one book that answers the burning question you carried all the way to the library. For me, The One was Julie Sondra Decker's *The Invisible Orientation*, but funnily enough, I did not find it until about three years after I first went to the library with my burning question: is it possible to not be sexually attracted to anyone? By the time I read Decker's wonderful treatise on asexuality, I was already well aware of my orientation, and I reflected on how wonderful it would have been if I had come across the book in the fall of 2014 when I searched frantically through my university library's catalog for an answer to my question. Frustrated by my search results pointing me to biological works on asexual reproduction and psychological works on disorders of sexual desire, too embarrassed to ask a librarian for help, unsure I could even explain the information need I had to myself, I gave up on my search and slunk away in defeat. I had no idea then that I had just reenacted the timeless experience of users looking for queer materials in libraries across many decades: misunderstanding, pathologizing, shame, and defeat.

Libraries are meant to be places where one can find materials to fill all number of information needs, but information on privileged groups has long been overrepresented. Queer materials are infamously difficult to find, especially for inexperienced searchers. The causes of this difficulty are complex, and a concrete solution to this problem does not yet exist. However, one truth is supremely clear: the patchwork solutions of the past are not serving our users well, and recent suggestions to draw on the queer community for answers would be a good way to include our users in the cataloging process, but it is not a replacement for a well-organized, professional method of categorization. We as information professionals have a responsibility to solve this open problem – users deserve a system that allows them to easily access the materials that they need for research, personal growth, and self-exploration. The information community must continue to seek a comprehensive, concrete answer to the question of how queer materials should be cataloged.

Though activists and catalogers have made significant progress in agitating the Library of Congress Classification System (LCC) to adopt more inclusive subject headings (Drabinski 2013), the existing system is undoubtedly inadequate. When a user enters a library hoping to find information on LGBTQ+ topics, they begin a search that may be highly personal or sensitive in nature. For many, library stacks serve as a space for those who are questioning and exploring their own identities, a critical resource for those who have nowhere else to turn. However, navigating the confusing cataloging of queer materials frequently makes browsing and discovery extremely difficult. Many users, after searching under terms like “lesbian” or “gay” and getting few results, or browsing near known items and not finding many other relevant titles, feel discouraged from continuing searches (Rothbauer 2013). This attitude is understandable when we consider how inconsistent the cataloging of these materials can be – even materials that are ostensibly on the same subject. Drabinski (2009) gives the example of the autobiography of famous trans queer woman Christine Jorgensen, cataloged under RC560 .C4, sitting many shelves away from Joanne Meyerowitz's 2002 work *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* at HQ77.95 .E85. Why are these two items, the latter of which begins with a chapter on Jorgensen, categorized so differently? The difference lies in the attitudes and beliefs of those assigning call numbers to the works at the time they were published. Meyerowitz's piece, published in 2002, is under the subject heading Transsexualism-United States-History. Jorgensen, who underwent gender reassignment surgery

in the early 1950s, was viewed quite differently by contemporaries looking to catalog her work. At the time, she was viewed as aberrant, a fascinating anomaly, and her autobiography was categorized under Psychiatry (Drabinski 2009). Since books are cataloged on the values of their time and may not be recataloged as attitudes shift, and because materials on queerness have been shuffled from subject heading to subject heading by the LCC (Drabinski 2013), LGBTQ+ materials may be shelves or even floors apart, making spontaneous discovery and browsing near impossible for users.

Not only is browsing exceptionally difficult, but catalogs themselves continue to be flawed. The language of subject headings themselves may be outdated, and LCC controlled vocabularies are restrictive and not “in tune” with language most people would think to use. Colbert (2017) reports that overwhelmingly, though the LCSH system supports mainstream language like “gay” and “lesbian”, searches for other commonly used phrases like “LGBT” retrieves barely any results at all, and “pansexual” retrieves nothing. And though the LOC has a subject heading for “Homosexuality,” Colbert reports that many users do not think to use this term or feel reluctant to search by it considering its history as a term used to “medicalize gays and lesbians” (p. 9). “Asexual people” was included as a Library of Congress Subject Heading underneath “Sexual minorities” in 2016, but searching for “asexuality” continues to bring up materials on biology and sexual disorders in many library catalogs. Users should not need to search with esoteric, outdated, or uncomfortable terms to find information about themselves; it reinforces to users that the libraries they are searching in still think in these outdated ways about them. It is no wonder that users choose to give up when faced with the lack of access and aura of discomfort that results, and this runs directly contrary to our mission as centers of information for all. Clearly, our current system of categorizing queer materials is patchwork, outdated, and impedes user searches. We need to create a system that better facilitates user discovery and exploration of these materials.

While it’s indisputable that the LCC system as-is has failed seekers of queer materials, some argue that a solution has emerged in social-based user-facilitated cataloging and tagging, or folksonomies. Advocates of community-based tagging rightly assert that it would allow queer communities to label materials with words they feel are appropriate, and would facilitate person-to-person connection through member-facilitated browsing, but the system is not without its flaws. Folksonomies are a fascinating space where we can better enable and continue to expand user interaction in catalogs, but replacing the system of cataloger-assigned subject headings with user-assigned ones would not improve usability of these materials. If anything, implementing folksonomies in place of traditional cataloging would only compound the existing issues. A person’s lived experience of queerness is a highly subjective matter, and the queer community is notoriously conflicted on the meaning and usage of language. Users would inevitably disagree on where items fit, whether one term or another applies to an item, and even what some terms mean. For example, should we use “gay” as an umbrella term to refer to both gays and lesbians, as the LCSH do currently (Greenblatt 2011)? And who should we include under the term “queer”? Asking ten different self-identified members of the queer community may yield ten different answers on these questions. This would only result in a myriad of diverse tags on items, or intense debate over where an item should be categorized, and relevant materials would continue to be difficult for users to identify in the catalog or find on the shelves.

Folksonomies of user-generated terminology can also inhibit searching by creating numerous unlinked terms for similar concepts, which can be especially confusing in a community that relies heavily on acronyms for terms (Greenblatt 2011). Especially for people beginning to explore their personal identity, this could be an overwhelming searching experience, requiring many searches using slightly varied terms while attempting to find the most relevant items. Alternatively, if tagging participation is low, users may feel discouraged if a search for a common keyword brings up very few results. Furthermore, because societal attitudes on queerness have historically been complex, for much of history writing openly on queer subjects was risky. Authors have frequently chosen to approach the matter with delicacy, and as a result, many pieces of literature with homosexual themes are subtle and symbolic (Campbell 2000). Debate rages on whether some works, like Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* (Campbell 2000), are in fact discussing queerness, further exacerbating the difficulty of assigning definite tags to certain pieces of literature. Libraries, and the catalogs we maintain, exist for the sake of allowing users to find information easily - trying to shape where and how we classify materials based on something so subjective as user opinions would be complicated and ultimately ineffective.

That said, though user tagging is an impractical tool to rely on as a primary method of categorizing queer materials, it can serve as a supplementary way to help users find and engage with materials in addition to a more organized, targeted categorization system. Researchers have found that users who tag queer items feel a sense of community with their fellow taggers, and that participating in the tagging process allows them to bond with other readers who share their worldview and interest in exploring their sexual and gender orientations (Adler 2013). Ornelas (2010) notes that the queer community has long had the ability to tease complexities and meaning out of words and the ideas they are meant to represent, and argues that folksonomies allow users to "employ their own language – perhaps a more authentic language" (p. 236) to describe themselves. Providing the opportunity for users to interact with others through materials that they identify with could provide a ground for the flourishing of local queer communities and support users' journeys through identity self-formation and self-acceptance. Considering how biased and inauthentic the LCSH language has traditionally been on these matters (Greenblatt 2011), it is difficult to argue that folksonomies would not bring some much-needed community involvement and perspective to the categorization process. If we accept that one of the largest problems we need to solve regarding queer materials is user comfort, we must think seriously about how folksonomies can help. Searchers' unease with the sense that they are being pathologized would certainly be ameliorated.

Yet the fact remains that queerness encompasses so many lifestyles, identities, and human experiences that it can be difficult for even the most experienced queer theory researchers to parse. The information sciences exist to bring order to the vast amounts of information that exists in the world, and queerness should be no exception. It is the obligation and the responsibility of the information science community, not the queer community, to categorize and order information in such a way that any layman, with the reasonable assistance of an information professional, can find what they need. When a user enters a library and leaves feeling that the information they need is too difficult or confusing to find, it is our failing, not theirs. It is for this reason that the information science community needs to find a way to

better organize queer materials – to show our users that their information need is not unusual or strange, and to fulfill our duty to provide access to all materials for all people.

So why is it so difficult to categorize queerness? Why does this issue deserve so much dedicated attention from library professionals? Queerness is set apart by its very nature: the concept of “queer” cannot be defined or pinned down, but people are attempting to search for materials using “queer” as a keyword. (Colbert 2017). It may feel counterintuitive to try to pin down where queerness should fit in a library catalog, but it is for exactly this reason that we should encourage a great deal of careful thought on this issue. Issues of categorization are critical to the gay community, as labels are shifting and provisional (Campbell 2000), and tackling this frontier of categorization may help define how we think about cataloging other ephemeral issues in the future. One of the most promising solutions to this dilemma suggests that we turn it on its head: rather than trying to bend queerness into categorization, we could apply queer theory to the very idea of cataloging. Rather than looking at catalogs as static and absolute, or as definitive classifications of knowledge from on high, we should take the opportunity to analyze the very idea of naming and categorizing systems from a queer perspective. Librarians should use the catalog as a jumping-off point to prompt discussion among their peers and patrons about how biases enter our language and influence our culture through literature, and constantly remind catalog users that “naming is [never] outside of power or resistance” (Drabinski 2013, p. 101). From this perspective, librarians can then invite users of the catalog to think about the process of cataloging differently: as an attempt to represent systems that are constantly in flux, relativistic, and that they can continue to shape.

When it comes to adequately providing users access to the diversity of queer materials, libraries have a long way to go. Those who enter our stacks and use our catalogs need to be able to find the materials they seek, especially when they relate to such a sensitive and important topic as one’s identity. There is no denying that describing “queerness” in a knowledge infrastructure is a challenge, but it is a challenge we must overcome. Under the current fractured system, with books cataloged in subjects based on very different standards of their time, the searching process is difficult and intimidating for users, and it fails to allow the true connection with ideas and materials that we would hope for. Olson (2001) famously highlights the need for the “other” to speak for themselves – that the power to name them/him/her/oneself is the most meaningful power one can have. For someone to even begin this process, they need to know where to begin and what others have said who came before, and for that, we need to ensure that any user can find materials they identify with. It is our responsibility to create a fairer, more usable baseline to work from. When users feel comfortable with the catalog, we can then help them to relinquish the illusion and assumption that libraries are all-knowing, are universal, and invite communities to have a voice in their own naming. Only by balancing the need for control and order of information with the human need for freedom of self-expression and self-identification can we establish a truly queer and equitable catalog.

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